

TEACHING REVISING/REVISING TEACHING: THE ITW SPRING SEMINAR

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When we teach, as well as when we write, we are constantly revising. Every fall, for example, I vow to talk less about writing and to spend more time working with student writing. But though I am a practiced reviser in my teaching and in my writing, I am often perplexed about how to teach revision. Beyond a few prescriptive generalizations, textbooks offer little help, and my crowded syllabus allows little time for revisions. Most challenging, however, is my students' attitude toward revision. To them, revision is punitive and tedious, evidence that they failed the first time. Such difficulties, I find, are not peculiar to teachers of college freshmen. A middle school teacher, for instance, reports that her students "resist revision like two-year-olds resist eating spinach."

Because revision is a perennial problem for writing teachers up and down the curriculum, it was, I think, an appropriate and welcome focus for ITW's first Brown County Spring Seminar. Intended to complement the fall conference like a single-course meal does a smorgasbord, the spring seminar is an opportunity to concentrate on a particular topic related to the teaching of writing, to work with a nationally recognized scholar/teacher, and to collaborate with other teachers to solve problems that are

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mutual. To lead this year's seminar on revision, ITW invited Nancy Sommers, a visiting professor at Rutgers University and a noted researcher on revision. In 1979 Sommers was the recipient of NCTE's Promising Researcher award for her studies of the revising practices of student and professional writers. Additionally, Professor Sommers is the former director of the composition program at the University of Oklahoma and has taught writing at New York University, Boston University, the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, and the Polaroid Corporation. The seminar, held May 7-8 at the Brown County Ramada Inn, included a Friday evening lecture by Sommers, a Saturday morning workshop led by Sommers, and a Saturday luncheon talk by Professor Joseph Trimmer, Director of the Writing Program at Ball State University.

Prior to the seminar, participants registered their concerns about teaching revision. Although some thought their problems were unique to the age they were teaching — my students are too young or too old to learn to revise — the concerns were strikingly similar: how can I motivate my students to revise? how do I provide feedback which does not "take over" the student's paper? and what strategies for revision can I suggest to my students?

In her opening lecture, Sommers addressed these concerns by discussing the insights derived from her research. Sommers' research suggests that "it is not that students are unwilling to revise, but rather that they do what they have been taught to do in a consistently narrow and predictable way."¹ Unlike professional writers who "discover meaning" through multiple drafts, students believe "that the meaning to be communicated is already there in the first draft."² Consequently, their revision becomes a "rewording activity" rather than a multidimensional "re-vision" of the whole piece.³ Too often rhetoric texts and teachers are responsible for these misconceptions. Texts, for example, recommend that students write their thesis statements before beginning a theme, a practice which means that students commit themselves to a particular focus before they have discovered what they want to say. And teachers often point out word level weaknesses — diction, wordiness, grammatical errors — in early drafts, thus directing the student's attention to words rather than to ideas. Based on her research, Sommers made several suggestions for teaching revision. In order to change our students' approach and attitude toward revision, we

must design assignments in which students can find some purpose for communicating a particular message to a particular audience; allow time for multiple drafts and describe those drafts as the necessary means for discovering what one has to say; and offer open-ended questions and comments that focus attention on the students' emerging ideas.

As always, putting theory into practice was the tricky part, and that was the agenda for Saturday morning. To begin the session, Sommers distributed two examples of successful revision. In the college example, a routine description of a Burger King became a unified and engaging final draft, the last line evolving from "I finally pulled out onto the street from the square cement parking lot and went home" to "The doors swing open and closed, sucking in new customers and spewing out the old, as if they were merely left-over burger wrappers." Similarly improved, an elementary student's theme moved from a series of loosely connected sentences about her summer vacation at Hilton Head to a detailed account of how to crab, concluding with the wistful line, "Even though I know all this I didn't catch a single crab."

Our optimism fueled by the previous evening's talk and these examples, we set about our small group task of generating ways to promote revision for a set of representative student themes. To no one's surprise, we sometimes disagreed. Was the theme defining "water" redeemed by its lively images, or was it a weak theme because it failed to follow the assignment? Do we serve students well by encouraging them to draft and redraft when the writing in many professions is done quickly and according to formula? Out of our animated discussions, however, came a number of ideas for promoting revision. One idea was to paraphrase the student's draft rather than analyze it, thereby allowing the student to "re-see" the content through another's eyes. Another was to enlist other students to role play a particular audience's response. A third suggestion was to schedule five-minute conferences which center on only a few responses to the draft, thus helping teachers resist the impulse to direct the revision and save time. Speaking enthusiastically after the workshop, Sommers said that every time she works with classroom teachers she finds that they already know most of what researchers are discovering and that they have already come up with ways to utilize this

knowledge.

As was true of the fall conference, an exciting feature of the seminar was the exchange among elementary, secondary, and college teachers, a further confirmation that we have much to offer one another. In the elementary teachers, secondary and college teachers found a contagious optimism; and in the sample college themes, elementary and secondary teachers found new reason to continue the fine work they have begun. Again we learned that most ideas for teaching writing are adaptable for any age, and as we left the morning workshop, teachers were exchanging addresses, requesting materials from one another, and making plans to propose panels for the fall conference. Delighted and impressed by our camaraderie, Nancy Sommers left Indiana eager to recommend the ITW model to leaders in other states.

Like a coach's dressing room pep talk, Joe Trimmer's closing talk sent us out hopeful and determined. The Brown County Spring Seminar did what it was supposed to do. We came to the seminar because we are indefatigable revisers, and we left with the ingredients for successful revision — motivation, varied strategies, and new vision.

NOTES

¹Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December 1980) 383.

²Sommers, pp. 385 and 382.

³Sommers, p. 381.